DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 284 285 CS 210 735

AUTHOR Saxton, Ruth O.
TITLE From the Impersonal to the Personal: A Cognitive Rationale for a Radical Freshman Writing Syllabus.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Processes; College English; *Course Content; Expository Writing; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Learning Strategies; Reading Writing Relationship; *Sequential Approach; Sequential Learning; *Teaching Methods; Textbooks; Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Processes; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS Research Curriculum; Rhetorical Theory

ABSTRACT

The implicit assumption behind personal writing assignments given at the beginning of a writing course is that personal essays eliminate the writing apprehension of having nothing to say. However, college freshmen find it very difficult to write about themselves and their own opinions because this writing involves abstract mental processes and communicative structures of which they know very little. By beginning with text-based assignments, teachers can introduce the skills and conventions prerequisite to personal writing assignments. The syllabus for a freshman writing course at a California women's college is based on this rationale. The course begins with six weeks of source-based writing, using sequential assignments from B. Spratt's "Writing from Sources," so that students master the cognitive processes and skills required to summarize, quote and explicate an argument and to express a personal response to a research/scientific text. Such skills include (1) identifying theses, (2) understanding how examples support the thesis, (3) determining the significance of the order of examples, and (4) understanding the function of transitions. For a midterm research paper assignment, students argue a rational position in response to an emotionally powerful text by C. Gilligan. The course ends with an analysis of M. Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and an autobiographical paper modeled after L. Hellman's "Pentimento Papers." Thus, the gap between personal and impersonal writing is bridged by reversing the order. (JG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Ruth O. Saxton
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED284285

CS 210 735

From the Impersonal to the Personal

A Cognitive Rationale for a Radical Freshman Writing Syllabus

Ruth O. Saxton

Paper Presented to CCCC Convention, March 1987

Virginia Woolf, facing an audience of college women in October of 1928, began by acknowledging the impossibility of the task she confronted. I borrow freely from the structures of the opening lines of A Room of One's Own:

But, you may say, we asked you to speak about cognitive theory and the teaching of writing--what has that got to do with writing paraphrases before Pentimento Papers? I will try to explain.

When you asked me to speak about cognitive theory and the teaching of writing, I sat down and began to wonder what the words meant. They might mean a few simples words about mental processes, a few more about knowledge bases; an allusion to well-structured problems versus ill structured problems, and that would have done. But at second sight the words seemed not so simple. The title "A Cognitive Rational for a Radical Freshman Writing Syllabus" might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, how students learn; or it might mean how we structure problems to ellicit better writing; or it might mean a discussion of course syllabi and assignment sequences; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together and you want me to consider them in that light. But when I began to consider the subject in this last way, which seemed the most

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

interesting, I soon saw that it had one fatal drawback. I should never be able to come to a conclusion. I should never be able to fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer--or a 4 C's Panelist--to hand you after 20 minutes' discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece forever. All I could do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point--before a student can write a Pentimento paper based on personal experience, she must have practice writing in response to printed texts; and that as you will see, leaves the great problem of how students learn and the related problems of how we should teach unsolved. Learning and teaching remain, as far as I am considered, problems too big for me to solve. But in order to make some amends for my inclusion on this panel, I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about text-based and personal writing.

Last May I attended a faculty development course on cognitive strategies and writing sponsored by the University of Chicago. For four days I breathed the rarified air of an intellectually charged atmosphere in which the specialized language of cognitive psychology encountered the specialized language of composition theory. By the end of the first day, I was asking what cognitive research had to do with me--a garden variety college English teacher. The new research felt like one more weight on my already over-burdened frame. Not only must I continue to be aware of Writing Across the Curriculum, writing to learn, stages of the writing process, and computer assisted instruction, now I must also be able to list cognitive strategies for writing assignments.

However, once I recovered from my initial intimidation by the jargon, I became excited. My freshman writing syllabus, which had been subjected to constant tinkering and revision over the years, began to make more sense to me. I had always enjoyed my writing classes, and students had become increasingly confident writers in those classes, but I had never successfully bridged the gap between personal and impersonal writing. Perhaps I needn't be uncomfortable admitting that failure. My syallabus satisfies a different set of criteria.

Traditionally, assignments in personal expression have been considered a way of getting students started in a writing course. The journal, free writing, narratives of personal experience are typical techniques for having students begin to communicate in writing. The rationale is that personal essays eliminate the kind of writer's block that develops when students fear they have nothing to say--no content.

In fact, what I have discovered in teaching students in freshman writing is that my students find it very difficult to write about themselves and their own opinions because this writing involves abstract mental processes and communicative structures of which they know very little. They may know what they think, but they do not know how to express what they think in writing--at least not in writing for a college audience.

By beginning instead with assignments that are text-based, instructors can teach students to write summary, exemplification,

paraphrase, quotation, argument, and so forth, developing skills that students require to write well on any subject in college. An introduction to some of the skills and conventions we often take for granted provides a basis for other more open-ended writing assignments. For example, my students need practice recognizing the thesis of a printed text before generating their own theses, and they create explicit thesis statements before they create implicit theses.

Therefore, my syllabus now begins with assignments in response to texts and concludes with an assignment in personal writing--an autobiographical assignment modeled on Lillian Hellman's Pentimento. Even a cursory exposure to recent research in cognitive theory helps me understand the novice writer's need to move from impersonal to personal writing assignment.

Ten years ago I began my English I classes with assignments in narration and description. The mid-semester paper was a Pentimento paper, and the final paper was a short research paper. Now I have reversed the sequence and have substituted a Gilligan paper for the research paper. (Both assignments have been distributed.)

Each of these assignments is difficult for novice writers, and because of the work of James Voss and Nancy Stein I have tried to figure out what students need to know and be able to do before they are ready to write each of these papers.

Voss and his University of Pittsburgh colleagues concentrated their research on problem solving in political science. He used

protocol analysis of expert and novice writers who were instructed to "think out loud: while generating their solutions to an assigned problem. Participants were told to imagine themselves as Head of the USSR Ministry of Agriculture and were asked what they "would do to increase agricultural productivity in the Soviet Union" to meet the country's needs (Voss 166).

One of the major differences between experts and novices was that experts began by considering their audience and by imagining the overall problem in its largest possible context, whereas novices immediately began listing subproblems, for example, the need for more tractors or fertilizer.

My students, like Voss's novices, begin by posing a series of subproblems. They may ask a series of technical questions about length, manuscript conventions, and what kind of footnotes I prefer, or they may assume they already have a formula for generating a foolproof paper: the five-paragraph essay, the topic sentence lid to the paragraph box, or the hourglass shape of a perfect argument. They want to know what I want because they rightly assume that I have some notion of what I want and that the invisible model in my head may differ from whatever they conjure in their heads. Voss's work made me examinee more closely those invisible models in my head.

To write an effective Pentimento paper, a student must be able to write about herself while focussing on somebody else. She must also be able to reflect on her past experiences from the vantage point of her present sense of herself, to see what was once there and what is

now there on the canvas of her own life. Furthermore, she must be able to control her Pentimento chapter by means of an implicit rather than an explicit thesis. Since she cannot possibly tell her reader everything she recalls about the subject of her chapter, she must be selective. She must be able to encapsulize a string of events in a single episode. She must maintain simultaneously an awareness of the big picture and of the specific incidents, the telling details.

Before she can select one of Hellman's chapters as a model for her own chapter, she must be able to identify the large patterns of those chapters. She must be able to narrate an incident, to describe feelings as well as people and places, to summarize an experience, to present conversations. Just to include dialogue, not only must she be selective, she must also know the convention for punctuating dialogue.

Her paper will be deadly if she begins with a statement about her subject's date of birth and then provides a chronological listing of major events. It will also be deadly if she writes a lengthy explanation of how her tennis coach changed her life. It helps if she has a general knowledge of autobiography and of the conventions that shape it as well as knowing the differences and similarities between Pentimento and other forms of autobiography.

Granted, my personal experience paper is highly structured, but I am increasingly convinced that even the simplest sounding request, for example to tell me a story, assumes that my students have considerable knowledge about the characteristics of stories.

Nancy Stein in an article entitled "Knowledge and Process in the Acquisition of Writing Skills," cautions against our too heavy reliance on the process model of writing, especially if we are overlooking the necessary knowledge bases for response to our assignments. She notes that we have given little attention to an accurate description of the types of knowledge used during writing, and suggests that often teachers and researchers who use a process approach to writing, "believe that writers have acquired most of the necessary knowledge needed to complete the writing task," whereas "many writing difficulties" arise from a lack of specific knowledge that has not yet been acquired (17).

Before my students are ready to write Pentimento papers, they need many structured writing assignments in which to develop skill and confidence. My course now begins with six weeks of sequential writing assignments drawn from Betsy Spratt's book, Writing from Sources. Students progress from exercises in reading and notetaking to identification of thesis sentences; from making selections among summaries written by the author, to writing their own summaries. They learn to handle quotations and to write paraphrases of other's words--meanwhile learning how to use sources without plagiarizing. They write summaries followed by analyses of underlying assumptions. They write rebuttals of someone else's argument, and they use an essay as a jumping off point for their own ideas.

I usually introduce a technique with exercises from Writing from Sources, then have students use that technique in writing in response to selections from Great Writing by Wiener and Eisenberg. For

example, if we have worked with exemplification in Writing from Sources, we then read Paule Marshall's "From the Poets in the Kitchen". Students write an essay about a speech community they know well, illustrating their assertions with telling details, paraphrase, and direct quotation. Their essays are wonderful, lively and extremely interesting, to themselves as well as to each other. Without the skills assignments in the Spratt book, their essays would have little exemplification or direct quotation. Without the Paule Marshall selection or others like it, they might not have models of lively and focussed writing that uses those techniques.

During the first six weeks, I also introduce the concept of writing as a process, and I teach peer review and revision as ways of re-seeing. By mid-semester when we begin work on the Gilligan assignments, students see themselves as writers. They spend many extra hours in the Electronic Writing Lab, reworking drafts on their computer disks, often asking each other which drafts are most worthy of further revision for inclusion in their writing folders. They are ready to tackle a more difficult and longer text, using their writing skills to help they understand what they read. I have chosen Carol Gilligan's book In a Different Voice as especially pertinent for students in a women's college and because the responses it generates are so diverse. Students care about their responses to Gilligan's ideas. The text evokes strong feelings, yet the students must write an "academic" paper in which they take a rational position and argue it, being fair to the the text, which, of course, they must first understand.

Here are some of the skills I have identified as necessary for writing a Gilligan paper:

1. determine the thesis to which the book responds
2. determine the thesis of the work itself
3. understand how examples support the thesis
4. determine the significance of the order of examples and argument
5. understand the relation of literary or artistic illustration to data and thesis
6. understand the use and misuse of theoretical models
7. understand methodology and its implications for establishing models
8. be able to define vocabulary unique to this author and other theorists
9. define relations of chapters (progression, exploration, of single facet, counterargument)
10. understand function of transitions in the writing
11. determine validity of work in a field that is relatively unfamiliar
12. determine implications of the work

To write their papers, students must be able to summarize an argument and express a personal response to a research/scientific text that does not completely invalidate that text on this basis alone; they must balance the validity of personal experience and professional experience. The Gilligan paper requires an understanding of a text that is comparable to texts students encounter in disciplines outside the English Department. My course focuses on the skills in the early

part of the semester, employs the thinking and writing skills to help students understand a text that initially intimidates many of them, and then invites students to respond to the ideas of that text in an orderly fashion.

Only after they have had considerable practice developing skills and have written their Gilligan papers does the class turn to autobiography. We read Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings and search for its underlying patterns. We end the semester by writing Pentimento papers after reading Hellman's book. Students bring to personal writing their acquired skills and confidence, and they write effectively. I have never received a boring or an unclaimed Pentimento paper.

In dinner conversation with colleagues my first night in Atlanta, I recalled those early years of trying to bridge the gap between personal and impersonal writing. I was never quite successful. By reversing the order, I have enjoyed watching students become proficient in both impersonal and personal writing; I have also discovered there's more than one way to get over that bridge.

Works Cited

Hellman, Lillian. "Pentimento," Three. ed. Richard Poirier. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979.

Spratt, Brenda. Writing from Sources, 2nd. ed. New York: St.

Martin's Press, 1987.

Stein, Nancy L. "Knowledge and Process in the Acquisition of Writing Skills." unpublished paper distributed in May 1986, to be published in the Review of Research in Education.

Voss, James F., Terry R. Greene, Timothy A. Post, and Barbara C. Penner. "Problem-Solving Skill in the Social Sciences," The Psychology of Learning and Motivation. Academic Press, Inc.

Weiner, Harvey and Nora Eisenberg. Great Writing. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987.

Woolf, Virginia. A Room of One's Own. New York: Harvest Book, HBJ, 1929.